

Short Stories of The Business World

The Business Gambler

By B. P. Owie.

"I guess that will hold William Grimes, P. A., down to the level for a while.

"Try to hold me in the background on that old option gag while he gets control of just enough of the timber to make his own price with me or go into the business himself as a competitor, will he?"

John Hake spoke thus as he jammed a number of leases into his small traveling bag and climbed into a muddy old buggy preparatory to a 22-mile drive to the little station of Lockport, down in Arkansas. Hake had spent the day with several farmers and had at the opening of this story just concluded a stroke of business which meant many thousands of dollars for the company of which he was the head.

Mr. Hake did not really need the money which the day's deal was sure to bring him. In fact, if it had meant the loss of an equal amount he would not have changed his tactics one bit. Hake had found that William Grimes, purchasing agent of the M. & N. M. Railroad Company, had tried to turn the tables on him in a business deal and he would not have hesitated for one moment at the expenditure of any amount of money in the battle to win.

He was a business gambler. He delighted in taking long chances and then staying in the game for the excitement of winning out. He clipped his coupons and did his voting in a northern metropolis, but was well known in the business communities of many cities. At the time of his encounter with Grimes he had just organized a company to erect a sawmill in a well known lumber district in Arkansas, and had about closed a deal with the M. & N. M. Railroad Company to supply it with railroad ties, the quantity of which would keep the mill in operation for several years.

The directors of the company met in Memphis and Mr. Hake was on hand to close the deal. Before the board got together Grimes, the purchasing agent who had conceived a brilliant idea while the deal was still in progress, went to the directors and suggested that he could buy the timber in Arkansas as cheaply as Hake and could raft it down the river to Moundville, where there was a sawmill which would turn out the ties at a price much lower than Hake had offered. Of course, this was not explained to Hake, who was simply told by the president of the company that other matters would claim their attention at the meeting scheduled, and asked to have the matter stand—or in other words, give them an option—for three days.

Now Mr. Hake did not need to exercise any great amount of his natural keenness to convince himself that unless he got up early and stayed late something was going to happen to that lumber deal over in Arkansas. He could not tell just what it was, but he knew well that a railroad that was just pining away for ties one week would not put the matter off unless there was something doing.

But what! That is exactly the question John Hake was asking himself for the hundredth time and had about decided that some other company had stepped into the game. The only thing he could not understand was how any one could compete with his company. The timber he had secured over in Arkansas was obtained at such a ridiculously low figure that he could not see how any company could meet his price.

He was so engrossed with the matter that he did not notice a young man approaching from the opposite direction until he had collided with him. He was about to apologize for his seeming rudeness when the young man called him by name. Then he recognized him as one of the clerks in the office of the M. & N. M. Co.

"You don't know me," said the young man, "but I know you. I am a clerk down in the offices of the M. & N. M. and have seen you there often. My name is Simpson."

Now, if there was one thing which John Hake could do quicker than another it was to think. And think he did at that time. Almost before he knew it Simpson was seated at a table in the hotel cafe with Mr. Hake opposite, and the pair was indulging in "the same."

"You down in Grimes' office?" he asked.

Simpson laughed right out. He had just tucked away his third greeting in the social intercourse, and was as willing to talk as he seemed determined to laugh. "That's pretty good," he said as he laughed again. "Grimes' department. That's what Grimes calls it. He's bigger than the road and when he makes any reference to the purchasing department he calls it 'his.' But he's gone away for a week and we'll have a little rest until he gets back. He went to Nashville this evening, and before he gets back he's got to go over to Arkansas on some kind of a lumber deal."

Did Hake look wise? Not on your natural. He tumbled to the fact that whatever Simpson knew about the office he did not know the nature of the business which Hake had on hand and the latter did not break any records letting him in on it. What he did do was to get away from Simpson as quickly as possible and after a good night's rest he secured a supply of leases from a legal blank store and took the next train for Lockport.

"Queer I might as well tie the lumber industry of that part of Arkansas up into a hard knot if I can beat Grimes down to where the mud is deep," he said as he boarded the train.

Lockport, where he got off, was a town of about 600 inhabitants when they were all home, and it swelled to about 800 on Saturday when the farmers all drove in with their families.

At the tavern John Hake failed to find anybody that looked like Grimes. Then he went over to the town livery and learned that both teams were in and had not been out during the day.

Down on the banks of the river the next morning there was considerable excitement among the farmers, who, 12 in number, with their grown sons, gathered and asked each other what was coming. The night before Hake had quietly dispatched two men on horseback to get to the farmers as quickly as possible and notify them to meet on the property of one of the number whose place was the most central.

Finally John Hake drove up. The crowd clustered around him as he stepped from the buggy. They were not kept long in waiting. Hake, as already stated, was a man of action.

"Gentlemen," he said, and he used the same diplomacy he would have exercised at a gathering of officials. "I have traveled back among you because I have found that my company will have to make a new arrangement that will be better for us all. The fact is, we will have to locate our mills nearer the river than we at first expected."

"You all own your land clear to the water front, and collectively you own fully five miles each way from the point about due north from here. I want to employ all of you who can be spared from the farms during the lumber season which is about to open, and I find that we will have use for 19 miles of the water front. These logs cannot be hauled a great distance and must be rafted. My company does not want anything that it does not pay for, and my object in coming back so soon is to offer you a fair price for the use of the water front, and secure leases for it. What do you think would be a fair annual rental, payable in advance every six months?"

Was John Hake wise? Not one of the rustics could imagine just what he was driving at until he had finished, and all the time he was talking money. They talked it over, during which time the entire party walked down to the river banks a quarter of a mile away as if to find the solution in the waters.

Finally one of the fellows—the one who had said considerable about a deal being a deal—said he was a mind to let it go for just enough to make the lease legal.

When Mr. Hake agreed to that last proposition and went a little further and agreed to pay an annual rental of \$20 a mile for the leases of the water

front, and to pay it in advance every six months, he started a regular love feast.

The journey to Lockport was completed before dark, as the horses had had quite a rest.

"No train for Memphis until morning," he mused, as he went to his room to tidy up a bit. "What's the odds? How I would love to see Grimes about now."

And in another instant he was on his way to the dining room, at the door of which he was again reminded of the strange act of Providence which steps in and presents to one's vision a living emphasis of what is just at that moment uppermost in one's mind. In other words, he nearly fell over Grimes in the doorway.

Mr. Hake, it might be mentioned right here, was no more diplomatic than he was affable, and he made a bee-line for the table which Grimes was headed for.

"Well, Grimes, if you are going to stay over I can recommend Jones as a good driver," he said.

"What makes you think I want a driver?" asked Grimes.

"Because if you go anywhere in this country except here in Lockport you have got to drive. And if you are going down into the timber country," and Hake grinned maliciously, "you'll have to drive, and drive damn fast to get ahead of Hake."

"What do you mean?" asked Grimes, angrily.

"Mean?" fairly yelled Hake. "mean? I mean that while you were chasing around Nashville and Moundville I've been a busy man. Only a few hours ago I bought not only the remaining timber within 22 miles of this railroad, but I removed the limit and bought the river. I can't regulate the flow of the stream, Grimes, my boy, but I can have a lot to say about who's doing to raft the logs from this country. Better come back to Memphis with me. That option expires in 48 hours, you know, and if you stay here half that time there's going to be a raise in the price of ties that will not reflect with credit to you as a purchasing agent. Good night."

Grimes did not believe what Hake said, and that's where he lost out. He went to the office of the tavern to write a letter to the president of the road which would go to Memphis on the same train with Hake. "I'll block him," said Grimes to himself as he prepared to write.

The letter had hardly been started when Grimes was interrupted by the talk of three men who stood at the drinking bar at the other side of the room. They were the man Jones who drove Hake that day and the two men who went ahead into the lumber territory on horseback.

Jones was the first to speak after Grimes got into the room and took a seat at the writing table. "He's a world beater," Jones was saying. "Think of a man leasin' a river of real running water."

Grimes looked up.

"Yes," said one of the others, "and the reckless way he handles money beats all. Why, he must 'a got rid of mor'n a hundred dollars today. I'm pretty near ready to pinch myself now. Ten dollars for a day's drivin' to give a feller a chance to buy up the river bank."

Grimes went to his room and tried to convince himself that the men had been posted in the office by Hake just to annoy him, and after debating the question in his own mind decided to carry out his original programme. He was out and gone before daybreak and Jones was the driver.

When Hake reached Memphis he went at once to the hotel. "If Grimes will only keep away until tomorrow night the price of ties to the M. & N. M. Railroad will go up like a hot-air balloon at a county fair, and Grimes will resemble the acrobat who comes down with the parachute which fails to open up."

Grimes played directly into Hake's hand by remaining away until it was too late to take advantage of the option. Hake went to the offices of the M. & N. M. Railroad on the last day of grace and seemed much surprised when the president told him the matter would be taken up and disposed of the next afternoon when Mr. Grimes returned.

Grimes got back late that night and on the following morning went to the president and without telling all the facts told that official that his deal could not go through and advised that a contract be made with Hake for the ties.

In the afternoon when Hake put in an appearance the president told him he was ready to sign the contract at the figures named in the original agreement.

"Sorry," said Hake, "but since those prices were quoted ties have advanced 25 per cent."

"But we have an option," said the president hotly, addressing Mr. Hake.

"You old have until midnight," said Hake, "but since then the market has fluctuated in my favor." Then for the

(Continued of page fourteen.)

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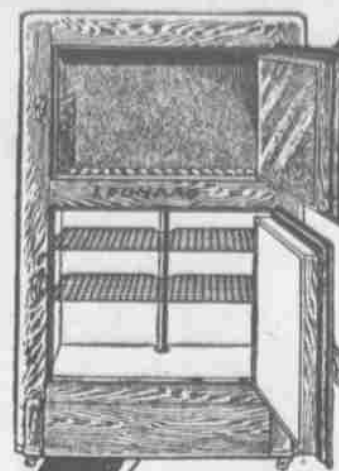
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